



Confronting Workplace Sexism

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SWE Dallas

Agenda

Confronting Workplace Sexism

Stories from the field

What is workplace sexism?

What can we do about it?

We all have ideas to share - **be interactive**

Stories from the field

What is Workplace Sexism?

What can we do about it?

My Story

- Kate Van Dellen
- Background in aerospace engineering
- President, New Trees Education

- Article “Report from the Field: Calling Out Actions Allows People to Grow”
 - Second job out of college
 - My responsibilities: ordering lunch, taking notes
 - My male counterparts were designing aircraft parts
 - Confronted manager, ended up quitting
- Workplace sexism affects many, but rarely do we talk about it openly



Other Stories from the Field

- A manager tells a civil engineer that her construction customer has asked for him to send “a real engineer” to the site
- During an interview, a hiring manager asks rapid questions without letting the interviewee answer. She asks what’s the deal and he explains he’s never had a woman work for him before and he wanted to at what point she’d cry.
- “Attaboys” given out at staff meetings
- Asking if we have enough “manpower” to complete a project
- Being mistaken for a waitress or administrative assistant



Stories from the field

What is Workplace Sexism?

What can we do about it?

Brief history of workplace sexism

- Sexual Harassment
 - unwelcome sexual **advances**, requests for sexual favors, and other **verbal or physical conduct** of a sexual nature that explicitly or implicitly affect an individual's employment, unreasonably interferes with an individual's work performance; or creates an intimidating, hostile, or **offensive work environment**.
- Sex Discrimination
 - when a person or group of people are **treated unfavorably** solely on the basis of their sex.
 - Includes discriminatory treatment related to hiring and firing, pay, job **assignments**, promotions, layoffs, trainings, and benefits
 - Title VII of the Civil Rights Act of 1964 specifically prohibits sex discrimination in the workplace



What does Workplace Sexism look like today?

- Verbal
 - “Thanks for unjamming the copier – it just needed a woman’s touch”
 - “Just play with your pretty hair and sit there while the big boys make the decisions”
 - “Can you put a real engineer on this project?”
 - Jokes
- Written
 - Emails that start with “Gentlemen...”
- Assignments
 - AKA “Gender Bias Assignments”
 - Differing by gender
 - Would people be surprised if a man was doing the task?

Accidental Sexism



Sexism whiplash

- How can you tell when sexism is happening to you?
 - Is this polite?
 - What if we called it “manners” instead of “sexism”?
 - It doesn’t need to be a “man” verses “woman” thing
 - We’re just 6 billion people trying to get along
- Sexism is often not about gender, it’s about **power**
 - Do you feel like someone was trying to knock you down a peg?
 - Is this a win/lose situation?
 - Men are accustomed to women being the losers
 - “You throw like a girl”
 - Does the comment make you feel isolated?



Modern Definition

Workplace sexism is:

- Language used to show one gender as the dominant or powerful gender
- Language used to isolate someone of a different gender
- Language that tells a group that someone doesn't belong based on their gender
- Assignments based on gender rather than ability to complete a task
- Can be unintentional, **Can be corrected**

Given this definition, how many of you have seen workplace sexism?



Stories from the field
What is Workplace Sexism?
What can we do about it?

The power in calling it out

- Sent to meeting with program managers on behalf of my manager
 - Eight men, one woman (me)
- I explained I was ready to hear the brief and was given the authority to make a decision on behalf of my manager
- When I asked a question
 - Top program manager said “uh, just mind yourself and your pretty hair while **us big boys do the heavy lifting**”
- My response: “Not cool”
- The room fell silent. The program manager quickly stumbled over an “um, well, I didn’t mean, you know...joking?”
- Suddenly no one thought it was a joke.
- I had deflected the comment that was designed to leave me powerless into **leaving him powerless.**



Why we don't call people out

- Culture has taught us to be “good girls”
 - Feeling like it's too risky
 - Fear of backlash
 - Not sure what to say
 - Fear that emotions will take over (cry, cracking voice)
 - Fear of being labeled “crazy”
-
- Not calling it out sends the message that it's socially acceptable



What can I do if I experience workplace sexism?

- Develop a catch phrase
 - “Not cool”
 - “Really?”
 - “How rude!” (courtesy of Stephanie Tanner)
 - Repeat the comment back to them and ask them to explain
- Call it out promptly
- Write down/email self with a narrative of the incident
 - Who said what
 - Who was there (witnesses)
 - Date, time, location
 - What your response was



Try it on

- Develop your catch phrase
 - “You throw like a girl”
 - “Let the men handle this”
 - “You’d be so much prettier if you smiled”



Practice

- You're in a conference room, and before the meeting gets started, the conversation is about a local baseball's team recent losing streak.
- When one of the women tries to enter the conversation with a comment about the new stadium, a man interrupts and says "really, do you even like baseball?"
- Now what?

Practice

- Your boss comes by your desk saying that you received this week's "attaboy" for the work you did on a top priority project.
- He explains, "I feel weird saying 'attaboy' since you're not a boy, you know, so I'm just going to not give one out this week. But you know it's you, congrats!"



What can I do to empower others to call out?

- Talk
 - Especially to college students
 - Don't scare them, empower them
- Social media
 - Share your catch phrase!
 - Tweet me @katevandellen
 - Thank people publically who break down biases



What can I do if I'm not the target?

- Be an advocate!
- Call it out
- Workplace Bullying
- Everyone has a right to be who they are
- You don't have to fit the mold

Questions?

Stories from the field

What is Workplace Sexism?

What can we do about it?

Thank you for participating

- Kate Van Dellen
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- Resources
 - Caitlin Moran *How to Be a Woman*
 - Jessica Valenti *Full Frontal Feminism*

Back Up Slides

Abstract

- Dealing with workplace sexism is difficult. It's hard to call out your manager for always asking you to take notes or hearing your suggestion repeated and accepted just because it came from someone else. This interactive session will share stories of actual recent workplace sexism and will give participants the tools to confidently confront it. We will also address the power male allies have in ending workplace sexism. The only way to change the workplace for the next generation of female engineers is to do something now.

